

Sculptures to Spark Multiple Senses

By J. S. MARCUS

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You can look at the work of Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto—but you can also touch, smell, taste and sit on it.

Known for transforming whole galleries into funky, funny and oddly luscious environments by using everything from nylon tulle to real spices, Mr. Neto has established himself as one of Brazil's more visible art exports. On Friday, a midcareer retrospective for the 49-year-old, called "Ernesto Neto: The Body That Carries Me," opened at Spain's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. It closes May 18.



Ernesto Neto's "Life Is a Body We Are Part of," on view in Spain. © Ernesto Neto/GFMGGuggenheim Bilbao/Erika Ede (photo)

In Mr. Neto's 2012 piece "Life Is a Body We Are Part of," visitors can climb up inside a 33-foot-high crocheted dragon. Originally exhibited in Tokyo, the new version has been installed in a Guggenheim gallery that echoes what Mr. Neto calls "the soft brutality" of Frank Gehry's curvaceous, titanium-clad museum architecture in Bilbao.

Many art professionals rely on the word installation to describe what Mr. Neto does, but the artist prefers "sculpture" and cites the hard stone creations of antiquity and the Renaissance as antecedents.

"When you do sculpture," he says, "you need to touch it. It's not like a painting, where you have a brush between you and the canvas." He adds that in the Brazilian tradition of artists such as Lygia Clark, "it's not unusual to touch an artwork—it's no big deal."

Carmen Melián, the New York-based senior specialist in Latin American art at Sotheby's, called Mr. Neto's 2009 installation "anthropodino" "one of the most magical events I have ever seen." Set up at New York's Park Avenue Armory, the work confronted visitors with pendulous pods and dinosaurlike bones. But at auction, Mr. Neto's work has yet to break the \$100,000 mark.

That's not the case in a gallery setting. "Drawings and smaller editioned sculpture start at about \$10,000 but could go up to \$400,000 for a monumental outdoor steel piece," says Ethan Sklar, director of New York's Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, which has shown Mr. Neto regularly for more than 15 years. "Installation-based works by Ernesto...range from \$150,000 up to \$2 million."

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, CEO/director of the Aspen Art Museum, expects Mr. Neto to arrive in Colorado with firm ideas, but nothing set in stone. His "sculptural installations," as she calls them, are largely created before they are actually installed, but she expects some significant tweaking on site. "He comes in with clear intentions, but he's also great at improvising."

Bilbao isn't the only museum with the Rio de Janeiro native on its agenda. From June 6 to Sept. 2, the Aspen Art Museum in Colorado will hand over both its upper and lower galleries to Mr. Neto, who will use the occasion to create two new site-specific works.

The 60-piece Guggenheim show stretches from early photographic work from the mid-1990s to recently updated installations. A new work, "Forest Sky," was inspired by a trip to the Amazon rainforest, which the artist suggests with a white canopied roof and a circle of orange pillows. The circle creates a makeshift stage as well as a place to crash, says Petra Joos, the show's curator. She encourages visitors to play a nearby guitar or some drums. Black pepper and turmeric, among other spices, flavor the air.